

High Hopes in the Karakoram

(from *The Way Ahead* 1994)

Local people are right at the heart of an ambitious planning process to create national park in one of the most famous mountain ranges in the world. Plans are also afoot to nominate part of the area as a World Heritage Site. If accepted, it will be the first time one of Pakistan's wilderness areas had been recognized in this way.

A large Chinese kerosene lantern, shone on the faces of about 50 Balti men one night in late August, at a public meeting in Hushe, in the Central Karakoram Mountains. Many of these men, gathered in the village square, had spent part of the summer working as porters for mountaineering expeditions and were already well aware that proposals were afoot to create a new national park in their area. In the lantern light it was hard to know what their thoughts were: if they were negative then any chance of creating a Central Karakoram national park was ultimately doomed. The Baltis are as much a part of the ecosystem as the mountains themselves. To ignore them would be an unforgivable act of folly, since it would set an opposition that which should be in harmony – villagers would end up competing with their environment, rather than living as part of it. On the other hand if they were positive, Pakistan had a rare opportunity to create a park that preserved the integrity of the relationship between the people and their land. A park that would simultaneously meet the needs of the people, the wildlife and the wilderness.

IUCN Pakistan was visiting Hushe at the request of the Government of Pakistan which is keen to create a national park that includes K2, the second highest mountain in the world and one which attracts trekkers and climbers every summer. The government, however, is anxious to avoid the kind of problems that accompanied the designation of the Kunjerab National Park in the north in the late 1970s. The non-consultative approach adopted at the time alienated villagers in the Shimshal valley and is still remembered with anger, some fifteen years later.

The government was therefore keen to know whether the local people would support the creation of a national park in Baltistan, and if so, the type of involvement they wanted to have. Consequently we were asked to visit villages in the area, in the Hushe and Shigar valleys to find out what the people really thought. If it seemed that local support was present then a planning process would begin, this time involving the local people from the very beginning.

Before setting out on our meetings we very tentatively scheduled a first consultative workshop for late September in Skardu: we didn't want to assume that the villagers would support the park, but at the same time we didn't want to turn up for the meetings empty-handed – we wanted to show that we were serious about involving them in park planning and management. We also wanted the proposed

workshop to be a key event, bringing together all interest, from responsible senior government staff, to the representatives of the key Balti villages of Hushe, Dassu and Askole. The workshop would be co-hosted with the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Cooperatives.

So we organized two preparatory missions to the area. During the first, in late July, we met with government, NGOs, tour operators, and our partner organization, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme to make sure that everybody knew about the proposal and the plans for the initial workshop in late September. Then a month later, during the second half of August, through our AKRSP contacts, we organized meetings with the villagers, to analyze issues and to ensure that the planning process was rooted in Baltistan. From there the sense of involvement and participation could work our towards Islamabad and beyond.

Nothing in these consultative processes ever goes as planned, of course. The July meetings went well, and luckily we were able to meet representatives of Askole in Skardu, early in August. This was fortuitous, as by the end of the month, the road to Askole had been washed away by heavy summer glacial meltwater run-off. We were also able to have discussions in Dassu, and get feedback from ASRSP activists in particular. We were then ready to set out for Hushe in an even more remote corner of Baltistan.

After a very rough ride to Hushe, from Skardu, we were hosted for dinner by Mohammed Aslam, a local Forest Guard and an AKRSP activist. As darkness fell and the villagers completed another long autumn day of gathering winter forage the time for our meeting drew closer. In the small square the villagers began to gather and the lantern was lit.

At about eight o'clock Aslam came to fetch us and we went off to join the 50 Balti men of all ages who had now assembled. By the light of the lantern, Ismael Zafar from AKRSP began a description. Of the national park in Balti, stressing that Hushe was being talked to first before the beginning of any wider public involvement process. He stressed that we wanted to know what they thought, in person, and not interpreted through a government functionary.

At this the faces began to show expression, and soon a dialogue began. While Hushe is experiencing a slow increase in alternative employment and education, it remains a subsistence community, at the very limit of cultivability. The issues raised principally reflected this. Protection of grazing rights, timber (fuelwood) access, basic health care and sanitation, cultural change, exploitation from outside the valley, and livestock compensation, were but a few of their concerns.

But after a long discussion of these and other issues, there was a basic impression of support for the idea of a national park, particularly if legal mechanisms were included to ensure their role in cooperative management, economic benefits, and training and employment opportunities. Of course IUCN and AKRSP do not need convincing; it is our *raison d'être* to espouse these approaches. By some accounts however, some parts of the government may still need persuading.

In any event, the consultative process was successful. In each of the areas we visited, the communities supported the suggestion that elected representatives should attend the September workshop in Skardu. Further meetings were held after we had left, where the communities, free of our presence, agreed on the issues they wanted presented to the broader audience attending the workshop.

Our own role in the workshop was basically one of facilitation. There were going to be a range of interests represented around the table: local people,

representatives from the Ministries of Tourism and Food, Agriculture and Cooperatives, protected area specialists, tour operators, and NGOs.

The list was endless, and the potential for disagreement correspondingly vast. We had no way of knowing how open these interests would be to each other's perspectives. Ideas such as decentralization, local control a co-management would be very new to some of them, and could, therefore, feel threatening.

Within this context we were hoping to reach at least some consensus on how the park should be planned, what the planning should take into account, and to get a discussion going as to where the boundaries of both the Central Karakoram National Park and the proposed World Heritage site might fall. When the government had first considered creating a park in the area, some provisional boundaries had been drawn up; however we were expecting them to be changed. In retrospect it was an ambitious undertaking and one which, in the event, was not aided by a few logistical hitches. Not only did the power fluctuate throughout the meeting in Skardu, but we arrived to discover the President of Pakistan was spending the night at the Shangrila resort complex in connection with the Northern Areas council elections. As a result we were well defended by the army!

The important things went well. The local representatives from Hushe, Dassu, and Askole arrived with local Aga Khan staff without incident, and despite the absence of several local dignitaries due to the President's visit we rapidly got down to business. Notwithstanding the power supply and our spotty translation people relaxed and a fairly anarchistic attitude towards fixed agendas began to take over which resulted in some very useful table cross talk. Towards late morning it was obvious that the Askole and Hushe representatives were ready to speak, and out it came. We were all a bit tense about what would be said – if it was very negative we were in trouble; mildly negative we could survive; mildly positive would reinforce our impressions from the preparatory meetings, and add weight to the next day's discussion on management planning; very positive reactions were not within the realm of possibility. Both formal and informal statements were made, and the messages were consistent: "We will support the protected area proposal, if our grazing rights, timber rights and traditional uses are respected!" This was wonderful – one of those rare moments that is professionally and personally enriching. When it suddenly dawns on you that your belief in, and efforts towards something important (in this case enabling real local involvement) has contributed to a beneficial outcome.

The next tense moment came as various officials began to react to the villagers' statements. The government agencies have a tradition of being defensive and resistant towards local people but on this occasion, nothing overly contradictory occurred. The long-term planning work will be faced by a very prevalent institutional culture of central control and decision-making but if we can approach the basic choices about decentralization gently enough, we may achieve the local control which is so necessary if the Baltis are to benefit from the Karakoram park.

Towards the end of the day, we began a discussion of the actual boundaries of the proposed World Heritage Site designation. A Site is one which is recognized by UNESCO's World Heritage Convention as being an area of such outstanding natural or cultural value that it forms part of the heritage of all people, and not just those in whose country it is situated. Over 130 countries are signatories to the Convention. As a signatory, Pakistan has an obligation to conserve any area within its boundaries which becomes inscribed on the World Heritage List. In addition, the other signatories of the convention have an obligation to assist Pakistan if its own resources prove insufficient to protect any of its sites at any point. Pakistan already had five World

Heritage Sites: the Fort and Shalimar Gardens at Lahore, Thatta, Taxila, the Takht-i-Bahi Buddhist ruins, and Moenjodaro. If part of the Karakoram mountain range joins the List, it will be the first area of natural beauty in Pakistan to be recognized in this way. New sites are nominated by the host country to the Convention each year. Each site is then considered by the World Heritage Committee which decides its eligibility and determines in what way the World Heritage Fund, which had an annual budget of US\$ 2.5 million, can assist it. The earliest a Karakoram site could join the Heritage List would be later 1996.

The boundary discussions at the workshop evolved into a detailed mapping exercise which was eventually facilitated by Manzoor Hussain of the Alpine Club of Pakistan, with his principal advice coming from the villagers. This spontaneous reaction was wonderfully fortuitous, because Hushe and Askole were able to draw the boundaries around their villages, with no objections from the mixed bag of professionals milling about in the background. The image of this event is going to stay with us for a very long time – you can try to design this kind of spontaneity, but getting the spark that caused it to ignite can never be guaranteed. We can put the initial conditions in place and push the ball over the lip of the cliff, but the results are always open ended. In this case it worked!

By the end of the mapping exercise, an additional proposal was on the table – to add the entire Rakaposhi massif to the park. This idea had already been proposed by villagers on the north side of the mountain in Nagar, so it was doubly exciting to have it suggested by the workshop participants. A Rakaposhi segment, coupled with the fact that the Central Karakoram park will be contiguous with the Khanjerab National Park and that there is likely to be a wilderness and wildlife reserve on the Deosai Plateau, means that over 50% of the Karakoram ecosystem will be protected. It may even go higher! This could end up being one of the largest protected areas in the world.

Given the relative success of the workshop's first day, the path was open for the second day's discussion of how to plan the park over the long-term. We were suggesting that the park be planned as a major regional economic development initiative, not just a wilderness protection proposal. There is a growing worldwide perspective, certainly within IUCN, that conservation and economic development must go hand in hand. With the desperate need for sustainable development in Baltistan we felt it was important to push for such an approach. And the idea was basically endorsed.

The workshop was not a perfect exercise, but it may have been one of the most effective and productive consultative processes I have ever participated in, bar none. Follow-up conversations with a variety of participants, both government and others, indicated that the village representatives were satisfied. Although, as with all things promised, there will be some skepticism until ideas are translated into practical reality and the benefits become tangible.

Follow-up to the workshop is thankfully already underway, due to the efforts of the Inspector General of Forests, Abeerullah Jan. He chaired and facilitated many of the sessions, along with Shakil Durrani the previous administrator of the Northern Areas, who acted as a surrogate Chief Secretary for the session. In all, a total of 19 actions were identified by the participants as being both practical and achievable within the next year.

One of the most important of these will be the establishment of a formal management planning process. This will involve the creation of a steering or advisory committee of local interests to oversee the technical work. A first task of the planning

team will be to complete the work of defining acceptable boundaries for the area. In doing this they will be taking into account the workshop recommendation: the provisional boundaries as notified on December 1, 1993 will be adjusted; whenever possible, park boundaries will follow natural boundaries, such as ridgelines, rivers and glacial features; and land which is privately owned, permanently inhabited, or intensely used by people will be excluded. As well as accommodating the local people's interests, the committee will also be working to ensure the park is compatible with the currently restrictive national parks legislation in Pakistan. The reform of these laws is on the cards.

Other tasks of the team will include exploring the potential for extending the park towards Rakaposhi and defining a "buffer zone" around the park.

Although it was agreed the work needed to start straight away, it is likely that the development of the park will indeed become part of an integrated regional development process, as advocated by IUCN. This makes a lot of sense, since the park has the potential to be a major new economic opportunity for the people of Baltistan. The process itself could even take the form of a complete Northern Areas Conservation Strategy along the lines of the work already underway in the North West Frontier Province and planned for Balochistan and the Punjab. The Inspector General of Forests certainly endorsed this idea.

Other actions included the appointment of a director of the park; a range of awareness raising activities and some specific research. A report on the status of wildlife, a census, and the identification of the social and environmental carrying capacity of the Baltoro area, possibly supported by an environmental impact assessment, are needed.

As far as the World Heritage site nomination is concerned, it was decided that this would take place once there was tangible progress on the above tasks.

In the longer-term, the workshop proposed many excellent ideas of which a kerosene depot at key departure points, the consideration of compensation for damage by wildlife, a staff training strategy, and liaison with the Chinese authorities on trans-border cooperation, are but a few.

So now the work begins. Assuming we can find some bridge funding through to next summer we should be able to arrange sufficient government and donor financing for this initiative to take off in a substantial way.

As always, resources are limited, and the work will take time, but the first step, so often the hardest, has just been taken. The heart of the project is in place – it is up to all of us now, to keep it beating.

Stephan Fuller,

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